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Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People

Summary record of the 294th meeting
Held at Headquarters, New York, on Monday, 22 May 2006, at 10.30 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. Badji ..... (Senegal)

Contents

Adoption of the agenda

Developments in the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem

Report by the Chairman of the United Nations Seminar on Assistance to the Palestinian People, held in Cairo on 26 and 27 April 2006

Briefing by the Director of the New York Liaison Office of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)

United Nations International Meeting in Support of Israeli-Palestinian Peace, 27 and 28 June 2006 and Consultations with Civil Society Organizations, 29 June 2006, United Nations Office at Vienna

Other matters

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The meeting was called to order at 10.40 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

1. *The agenda was adopted.*

Developments in the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem

2. **The Chairman** informed the Committee that on 9 May 2006 a meeting of Quartet principals had been held at United Nations Headquarters to discuss the deteriorating situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and ways of addressing the current impasse in negotiations and the rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation of the Palestinian people. The Quartet had issued a statement underscoring its continued commitment to the principles of partnership and negotiation leading to a two-State solution, as embodied in the Road Map. The Quartet had also expressed its willingness to endorse a temporary international mechanism that was limited in scope and duration, operated with full transparency and accountability and ensured direct delivery of assistance to the Palestinian people, and it welcomed the offer of the European Union to develop and propose such a mechanism. The Quartet had also met that day with the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. It was to be hoped that the steps being undertaken by the Quartet, its regional partners and international donors would provide for the urgent needs of the Palestinian people and help both sides move closer to resuming peace negotiations.

3. **Mr. Mansour** (Observer for Palestine) recalled that President Abbas had sent a letter to the Quartet principals ahead of their 9 May meeting indicating Palestine's readiness to engage in final status negotiations and expressing his expectation that the Quartet would reiterate its position opposing unilateral action by the Israeli side to define the borders of Palestine. He had stressed the extreme need for a mechanism to allow economic assistance to reach the Palestinian people, but had urged that such a mechanism should not only address the humanitarian need but should help to protect the investment of the international community and the Palestinian people in the institutions of the Palestinian Authority, for example, by finding a way to pay the salaries of employees of the Palestinian Authority. The efforts of the Quartet principals and, in particular, the European Union in defence of the Palestinian people were highly valued, but a purely humanitarian mechanism would tend to duplicate the work of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). The Palestinian Authority would greatly appreciate the help of the Committee members in engaging the European Commission to consider a dual mechanism.

4. Hostilities by the occupying Power continued, as exemplified by the escalation the previous week that had led to the killing of six Palestinians in Kabatia, the continued bombardment in the northern part of Gaza and the killing only the day before of five Palestinians, including a mother and child. The economic boycott and the military attacks constituted an attempt to isolate and destabilize the Palestinian Authority and to pave the way for the Israeli Government to put into effect its illegal plan, which the Israeli Prime Minister was expected to articulate during his visit to Washington, to set the borders unilaterally, confiscating more than half the West Bank.

5. On many recent occasions President Abbas had reiterated his willingness to negotiate with the Israeli side and his vision of a peace conference that would bring the conflict to an historic conclusion, with the establishment of an independent Palestinian State within 1967 borders and the solution of the refugee question on the basis of General Assembly resolution 194 (III). It was to be hoped that elements in the Israeli Government and society and the international community would pressure the Israeli Prime Minister to return to negotiations leading to a two-State solution.

6. **Mr. Mahmassani** (Observer for the League of Arab States) said that Palestine was passing through one of its more critical phases, as Israel attempted to starve the people of Palestine of basic needs, so that children were dying for lack of medication and medical treatment. The League urged the Quartet, the international community and civil society to expedite the establishment of a mechanism to deliver assistance to the Palestinian people, and it was confident that the Committee would also do its part to convey that message to the concerned delegations and organizations.

7. Although the Palestinian side had clearly indicated its readiness to proceed with negotiations, regrettably the Israeli Prime Minister had the day

before expressed an unwillingness to do so. It was to be hoped that he would reconsider that position after his visit to Washington and that the parties concerned would bring pressure to bear on the Israeli Government to bring about a peaceful solution to conflict, not just in Palestine, but in the whole of the Middle East. The Israeli Prime Minister apparently had a plan to impose borders unilaterally. Such a step would not lead to peace and would have grave repercussions throughout the region. Israel must accept and fulfil its international obligations for a bilateral establishment of borders.

8. **Mr. Atieh** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that the Palestinian people had suffered for many decades from Israeli occupation and continued to be the victims of arbitrary Israeli practices, including the expansion of illegal settlements and the building of the wall. The stubborn refusal of the Israeli side to allow the existence of an independent Palestinian State, with Jerusalem as its capital, had resulted in an economic and humanitarian crisis that was impossible for the Palestinian people to overcome alone. The Committee must express the strongest solidarity with the Palestinian people in achieving their aspirations to self-determination. However, the plans the Israeli side was currently concocting would not bring about a fair and lasting solution.

9. Meanwhile, a solution must be found to the economic problems caused by the Israeli blockade and the interruption of assistance following the exercise by the Palestinian people of their democratic rights. While taking note of the efforts of the Quartet to provide humanitarian assistance, his delegation considered that temporary measures were not highly efficient and provided only short-term relief. What was needed was a permanent mechanism, and it should be recalled that such an organ, UNRWA, already existed within the United Nations system. Moreover, in addition to relief, much needed to be done to enable Palestine to function as an independent State, so that lasting peace could be established in the region. His delegation wished to thank the Governments of Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia for their efforts to work with the Quartet in finding a solution.

10. **The Chairman** said that the Bureau would be conferring to consider what steps the Committee could take to further the interests of the Palestinian people.

Report by the Chairman of the United Nations Seminar on Assistance to the Palestinian People, held in Cairo on 26 and 27 April 2006

11. **The Chairman** said that the theme of the seminar had been "International efforts at alleviating the Palestinian economic and humanitarian crisis". The Committee was profoundly grateful to the Government of Egypt for hosting the event at such a critical time for the Palestinian people and all those working for their cause. The seminar was attended by representatives of 55 Governments, the Palestinian Authority, intergovernmental organizations, United Nations agencies and civil society and was covered by 31 representatives of the media. The Committee was well represented by its Bureau and other members. Addresses were given by the Assistant Minister for Multilateral Relations of Egypt on behalf of the Minister for Foreign Affairs, by the United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs on behalf of the Secretary-General, by a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council and by himself as Committee Chairman.

12. In plenary sessions presentations were made by experts from Palestinian and Israel and United Nations agencies, programmes and departments involved in programmes of assistance to the Palestinian people. The panellists assessed the main characteristics of the economic and humanitarian crisis, the facts on the ground and the modalities for stabilizing and rehabilitating the Palestinian economy.

13. The seminar participants reaffirmed that it was crucial to expand and accelerate assistance to the Palestinian people and that the donor community should not be driven by political considerations in its response to the urgent humanitarian need. The situation in the Gaza Strip was particularly dire because of the repeated and prolonged closures of border crossings by the occupying Power, and there was a need for the immediate and full implementation of the Agreement on Movement and Access signed on 15 November 2005. If the current fiscal crisis was left unaddressed, the Palestinian institutions established as a result of the peace process and intended to become the foundation of a future Palestinian State would simply collapse. The participants called upon Israel to resume, without further delay, the transfer of taxes collected on behalf of the Palestinian Authority in accordance with international agreements, and they called upon the

donor community to use alternative ways of channelling funds that were acceptable to all sides.

14. The participants stressed that economic development under occupation was virtually impossible, warning that Israel's plan to unilaterally draw permanent borders incorporating large parts of the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, would be a grave threat to the economic and humanitarian situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and would dash all hopes of ever achieving a lasting peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians. In that regard, the international community was urged to intervene before it was too late and to press for the implementation of the established and recognized frameworks for the settlement of the conflict, including the relevant United Nations resolutions, the Quartet's Road Map and the Arab Peace Initiative adopted at the League of Arab States Summit in Beirut in 2002.

15. It was noted that while United Nations system agencies, especially UNRWA, played an important and indispensable role in the Occupied Palestinian Territory in providing basic humanitarian needs and other assistance to the Palestinian people, the capacities of those agencies on the ground were limited. Indeed, they were not a substitute for the established Palestinian institutions. The Committee, for its part, had reiterated its position that the United Nations should be fully engaged in the issue until a comprehensive, just and lasting solution to the question of Palestine was achieved on the basis of international law and the relevant United Nations resolutions, particularly Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 1397 (2002) and 1515 (2003).

16. **Mr. Abdel** (Egypt) said that it had been an honour for Egypt to host the Seminar at a time when the Palestinian people were suffering from economic hardships. Participants had endeavoured to craft proposals and take decisions that would bring the international community together to address the unjust and painful humanitarian situation facing the Palestinian people. Indeed, it was very important to highlight not only the living conditions in the Occupied Palestinian Territory but also the Palestinian people's right to self-determination, including the establishment of an independent State with East Jerusalem as its capital. Egypt would continue to support the Palestinian people until they attained their goal of an independent State based on international legitimacy.

Briefing by the Director of the New York Liaison Office of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)

17. **Mr. Whitley** (Director, New York Liaison Office of UNRWA) said that anecdotal and patchy empirical information from the field pointed clearly towards a serious and steadily worsening economic situation, particularly in Gaza, where the population was less able to be self-reliant than in the West Bank. The latest figures from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics reported that in the first quarter of 2006, GDP growth had declined by 7 per cent compared to the last quarter of 2005. However, some data suggested improvements in many sectors during 2005, including the steady rise in the number of building licenses issued — an indication that at least some sectors of the population were able to manage, although that was certainly not the case for the vast majority. The salaries of Palestinian Authority employees had not been paid for some three months. Indeed, according to the World Bank, unemployment in Gaza was likely to reach 72 per cent in the near term. UNRWA had recently seen a five-fold increase in the number of new applicants — 20,000 families a month, equivalent to over 100,000 people — for emergency assistance in some Gaza refugee camps. Under its current emergency programme, the Agency was already supporting some 1.1 million people. The Agency anticipated that that figure could rise by some 50 per cent in the near term.

18. The closure of the Kani crossing point for some 50 per cent of the time during 2006 had created inevitable problems, both with regard to imports of humanitarian supplies and exports of Palestinian goods. While the Government of Israel had repeatedly assured the Agency of the priority it gave to getting food to the needy people, in particular in the Gaza Strip, in practice that had not always been possible because of the closures imposed, the Israelis argued, for security reasons. The health sector was in particularly bad shape and there was an increase in the number of visits to UNRWA health clinics as a consequence.

19. Much was riding on the "temporary international mechanism" under discussion. At a meeting in Brussels on 24 May, the European Commission, donors, United Nations and other interested parties would discuss an options paper on ways to provide assistance to the Palestinian people which would most likely cover

direct delivery of assistance, the maintenance of essential services, the provision of equipment and supplies as well as financial transfers to individuals or the payment of salaries. While major questions remained about the scope of the mechanism, including how it would be managed, reporting procedures and prioritization of the available funds, it was at least encouraging that some form of multilateral assistance was being considered.

20. Noting that UNRWA had been asked by some, including the Secretary-General to take on an expanded role in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, he said that its first priority was to take care of that portion of the refugee population, including schoolchildren, which had previously relied on government services from the Palestinian authorities and which would be reverting to the Agency's health clinics and welfare system. His Agency, like the rest of the United Nations system, was careful not to attempt to replace the Palestinian Authority in its normal functions and would do its utmost not to undermine the political institutions carefully built up over the past decade or enter a political debate not of its choosing. However, UNRWA was anxious to put its vast network of facilities and over 13,000 staff in the West Bank and Gaza Strip at the disposal of governments that wished to provide humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian people.

21. The Agency's expanded role would require not only increased funding but also the agreement of all political parties and would depend on the fate of the "temporary international mechanism". The 2006 emergency appeal had been matched by just over 50 per cent of pledges from donors and would need to be expanded significantly over the next few days as part of a revised consolidated appeal process for the United Nations system as a whole. UNRWA needed to build its capacity and while there were prospects of obtaining significant additional funding from certain donors, the Agency must be careful not to divert funds away from the needs of regular operations outside the Occupied Territory, where 60 per cent of the refugee population under its care lived in Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic. The regular budget requirement had increased significantly in the current biennium to meet the needs of a five-year medium-term plan. A significant shortfall of over $100 million was already anticipated in the budget requirement for 2006.

United Nations International Meeting in Support of the Israeli-Palestinian Peace, 27 and 28 June 2006 and Consultations with Civil Society Organizations, 29 June 2006, United Nations Office at Vienna

22. **The Chairman** introduced Working Paper No. 2 relating to the event.

23. *The Committee took note of Working Paper No. 2.*

Other matters

24. **The Chairman** said that the Department of Public Information was organizing an International Media Seminar on Peace in the Middle East under the theme "New Challenges in the Middle East Peace Process and Israeli-Palestinian Dialogue" in Moscow on 8 and 9 June 2006.

25. **Mr. Dorani** (Chief of the Palestine, Decolonization and Human Rights Section, Department of Public Information), briefing the Committee on the International Media Seminar, said that, as part of the Department's special programme on the question of Palestine, the two-day Seminar would bring together people from various parts of the world, particularly from Israel and Palestine. They would include current and former policymakers; members of civil society, including, for the first time, representatives of Israeli and Palestinian trade unions; media experts; international experts in law, politics and economics; eminent personalities; members of the academic community; and parliamentarians from both the Knesset and the Palestinian Legislative Council. The seminar would have five panel discussions focusing on: the aftermath of the Israeli and Palestinian elections; the impact of regional changes on the Middle East peace process; economic and social viability in a two-State solution; media coverage of the Middle East peace process; and civil society participation and perspective of grassroots-level initiatives.

26. **Mr. Mansour** (Observer for Palestine) expressed appreciation to DPI for organizing the encounter on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as to the Government and people of the Russian Federation for agreeing to host the Seminar in Moscow. He said that the effort would help to move the peace process forward and bring justice to the Palestinian people. He thanked Qatar for agreeing to host a future seminar and supported the idea of having regular reporting by UNRWA on its activities in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, noting that it was extremely useful to the

work of the Committee. He had sent a detailed letter to the Secretary-General concerning the setting up of a register of damages to the Palestinian people in connection with Israel's illegal construction of the separation wall in anticipation of the Secretary-General's announcement on the establishment of the unit that would undertake that exercise.

27. **The Chairman** said the Bureau of the Committee had been informed that the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) had begun an in-depth evaluation of the work of the Division for Palestinian Rights and other divisions of the Department of Political Affairs at the request of the Committee for Programme Coordination. Phase I of that evaluation, focusing on Subprogramme 1, had been completed with an evaluation of the work of the regional divisions of the Department. Phase II would include the remaining political affairs subprogrammes, including Subprogramme 5 on the Question of Palestine. The survey would be sent to the Permanent Missions of Committee members around mid-June. OIOS also planned to interview members of the Bureau of the Committee. He urged all those concerned to cooperate with the Secretariat in that exercise.

The meeting rose at noon.